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WHY I AM NOT A FREE-RELIGIONIST.

MY friend, O. B. Frothingham, has lately, in the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, given his reasons for taking the attitude of a believer in Free Religion. It is not my purpose to reply to this article, or to criticise these arguments, but to state the reasons which cause me, though a heretic in view of the popular creeds, to adhere to Christianity as that historic faith which is still the belief of civilized man, and to follow Jesus as the great religious and moral leader of the human race.

But what is meant by "Free Religion?" I understand by it individualism in religion. It is the religious belief which has made itself independent of historic and traditional influences, so far as it is in the power of any one to attain such independence. In Christian lands it means a religion which has cut loose from the Bible and the Christian Church, and which is as ready to question the teaching of Jesus as that of Socrates or Buddha. It is, what Emerson called himself, an endless Seeker, with no past behind it. It is entire trust in the private reason as the sole authority in matters of religion.

Free Religion may be regarded as Protestantism carried to its ultimate results. A Protestant *Christian* accepts the leadership of Jesus, and keeps himself in the Christian communion; but he uses his own private judgment to discover what Jesus taught, and what Christianity really is. The Free Religionist goes a step further, and decides by his own private judgment what is true and what false, no matter whether taught by Jesus or not.

Free Religion, as thus understood, seems to me opposed to the law of evolution, and incompatible with it. Evolution educes the present from the past by a continuous process. Free Religion cuts itself loose from the past, and makes every man the founder of his own religion. According to the law of evolution,

confirmed by history, every advance in religion is the development from something going before. Jewish monotheism grew out of polytheism; Christianity and Mohammedanism out of Judaism; Buddhism out of Brahminism; Protestant Christianity out of the Roman Catholic Church. Jesus himself said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the Prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." The higher religions are not made; they grow. Of each it may be said, as of the poet: "*Nascitur, non fit.*" Therefore, if there is to arrive something higher than our existing Christianity, it must not be a system which forsakes the Christian belief, but something developed from it.

According to the principle of evolution, every growing and productive religion obeys the law of heredity and that of variation. It has an inherited common life, and a tendency to modification by individual activity. Omit or depress either factor, and the religion loses its power of growth. Without a common life, the principle of development is arrested. He who leaves the great current which comes from the past, loses headway. This current, in the Christian communion, is the inherited spirit of Jesus. It is His life, continued on in His Church; His central convictions of love to God and to man; of fatherhood and brotherhood; of the power of truth to conquer error, of good to overcome evil; of a Kingdom of Heaven to come to us here. It is the faith of Jesus in things unseen; His hope of the triumph of right over wrong; His love going down to the lowliest child of God. These vital convictions in the soul of Jesus are communicated by contact from generation to generation. They are propagated, as He suggested, like leaven hidden in the dough. By a different figure, Plato, in his dialogue of *Ion*, shows that inspiration is transmitted like the magnetic influence, which causes iron rings to adhere and hang together in a chain. Thoughts and opinions are communicated by argument, reasoning, speech, and writing; but faith and inspiration by the influence of life on life. The life of Jesus is thus continued in His church, and those who stand outside of it lose much of this transmitted and sympathetic influence. Common life in a religious body furnishes the motive force which carries it forward, while individual freedom gives the power of improvement. The two principles of heredity and variation must thus be united in order to combine union and free-

dom, and to secure progress. Where freedom of thought ceases, religion becomes rigid. It is incapable of development. Such, for instance, is the condition of Buddhism, which, at first full of intellectual activity, has now hardened into a monkish ritual.

Free Religion sacrifices the motive power derived from association and religious sympathy for the sake of a larger intellectual freedom. The result is individualism. It founds no churches, but spends much force in criticising the Christian community, its belief, and its methods. These are, no doubt, open to criticism, which would do good if administered sympathetically and from within ; but produce little result when delivered in the spirit of antagonism. Imperfect as the Christian Church is, it ought to be remembered that in it are to be found the chief strength and help of the charities, philanthropies, and moral reforms of our time. Every one who has at heart a movement for the benefit of humanity appeals instinctively for aid to the Christian churches. It is in these that such movements usually originate and are carried on. Even when, as in the anti-slavery movement, a part of the churches refuse to sympathize with a new moral or social movement, the reproaches made against them show that in the mind of the community an interest in all humane endeavor is considered to be a part of their work. The common life and convictions of these bodies enable them to accomplish what individualism does not venture to undertake. Individualism is incapable of organized and sustained work of this sort, though it can, and often does, co-operate earnestly with it.

The teaching of Jesus is founded on the synthesis of Truth and Love. Jesus declares himself to have been born "to bear witness to the truth," and He also makes love, divine and human, the substance of His gospel. The love element produces union, the truth element freedom. Union without freedom stiffens into a rigid conservatism. Freedom without union breaks up into an intellectual atomism. The Christian churches have gone into both extremes, but never permanently ; for Christianity, as long as it adheres to its founder and His ideas, has the power of self-recovery. Its diseases are self-limited.

It has had many such periods, but has recovered from them. It passed through an age in which it ran to ascetic self-denial, and made saints of self-torturing anchorites. It afterward became a speculative system, and tended to metaphysical creeds and

doctrinal distinctions. It became a persecuting church, burning heretics and Jews, and torturing infidels as an act of faith. It was tormented by dark superstitions, believing in witchcraft and magic. But it has left all these evils behind. No one now is put to death for heresy or witchcraft. The monastic orders in the church are preachers and teachers, or given to charity. No one could be burned to-day as a heretic. No one to-day believes in witchcraft. The old creeds which once held the church in irons, are now slowly disintegrating. But reform, as I have said, must come from within, by the gradual elimination of those inherited beliefs which interfere with the unity of the church and the leadership of Christ himself. The Platonic and Egyptian Trinity remaining as dogma, repeated but not understood,—the Manichæan division of the human race into children of God and children of the Devil,—the scholastic doctrine of the Atonement, by which the blood of Jesus expiates human guilt,—are being gradually explained in accordance with reason and the teaching of Jesus.

Some beliefs, once thought to be of vital importance, are now seen by many to be unessential, or are looked at in a different light. Instead of making Jesus an exceptional person, we are coming to regard Him as a representative man, the realized ideal of what man was meant to be, and will one day become. Instead of considering His sinlessness as setting Him apart from His race, we look on it as showing that sin is not the natural, but an unnatural, condition of mankind. His miracles are regarded not as violations of the laws of nature, but anticipations of laws which one day will be universally known, and which are boundless as the universe. Nor will they in future be regarded as evidence of the mission of Jesus, since He Himself was grieved when they were so looked upon, and made His truth and His character the true evidence that He came from God. The old distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” will disappear when it is seen that Jesus had a supernatural work and character, the same in kind as ours, though higher in degree. The supreme gifts which make Him the providential leader of the race do not set Him apart from His brethren if we see that it is a law of humanity that gifts differ, and that men endowed with superior powers become leaders in science, art, literature, politics; as Jesus has become the chief great spiritual leader of mankind.

Men are now searching the Scriptures, not under the bondage of an infallible letter, but seeking for the central ideas of Jesus and the spirit of His gospel. They begin to accept the maxim of Goethe : "No matter how much the gospels contradict each other, provided THE GOSPEL does not contradict itself." The profound convictions of Christ, which pervade all His teaching, give the clue by which to explain the divergencies in the narrative. We interpret the latter by the light of the spirit. We see how Jesus emphasized the law of human happiness—that it comes from within, not from without, that the pure in heart see God, and that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We comprehend the stress He lays on the laws of progress—that he who humbleth himself shall be exalted. We recognize His profound conviction that all God's children are dear to Him, that His sun shines on the evil and the good, and that He will seek the one lost sheep till He find it. We see His trust in the coming of the Kingdom of God in this world, the triumph of good over evil, and the approaching time when the knowledge of God shall fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. And we find His profound faith in the immortal life which abides in us, so that whoever shares that faith with Him can never die.

The more firmly that these central ideas of Jesus are understood and held, the less importance belongs to any criticism of the letter. This or that saying, attributed to Jesus in the record, may be subjected to attack ; but it is the main current of His teaching which has made Him the leader of civilized man for eighteen centuries. That majestic stream will sweep on undisturbed, though there may be eddies here or stagnant pools there, which induce hasty observers to suppose that it has ceased to flow.

*" Rusticus expectat dum defluit amnis, at ille
Volvitur et volvetur, in omne volubilis ævum."*

I sometimes read attacks on special sayings of the record, which argue, to the critic's mind, that Jesus was in error here, or mistaken there. But I would recommend to such writers to ponder the suggestive rule of Coleridge : "Until I can understand the ignorance of Plato, I shall consider myself ignorant of his understanding ;" or the remark of Emerson to the youth who brought him a paper in which he thought he had refuted Plato : "If you attack the King, be sure that you kill him."

When the Christian world really takes Jesus *Himself* as its leader, instead of building its faith on opinions *about* Him, we may anticipate the arrival of that union which He foresaw and foretold—"As Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me." Then Christians, ceasing from party strife and sectarian dissension, will unite in one mighty effort to cure the evils of humanity and redress its wrongs. Before a united Christendom, what miseries could remain unrelieved? War, that criminal absurdity, that monstrous anachronism, must at last be abolished. Pauperism, vice, and crime, though continuing in sporadic forms, would cease to exist as a part of the permanent institutions of civilization. A truly Catholic Church, united under the Master, would lead all humanity up to a higher plane. The immense forces developed by modern science, and the magnificent discoveries in the realm of nature, helpless now to cure the wrongs of suffering man, would become instruments of potent use under the guidance of moral forces.

According to the law of evolution, this is what we have a right to expect. If we follow the lines of historic development, not being cheated into extreme individualism, if we maintain the continuity of human progress, this vast result must finally arrive. For such reasons I prefer to remain in the communion of the Christian body, doing what I may to assist its upward movement. For such reasons, I am not a Free Religionist.

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.